

WHILE IT RAINED

By HERMAN LANDON



THERE wasn't the slightest excuse for Bickins' acting the way he did. He was forty-five, as life is measured by the figures on the dial. As it is occasionally gaged by heart throbs, he was somewhere between the age of rococo and years of discretion. He was afflicted with a mysterious apologetic cough, premature stiffness in the joints, and incipient baldness. Consider that he was engaged in strictly commercial pursuits, that his office in a Halsted-st. building commanded a comprehensive view of a murky factory district, mitigated only by palmists' signs, gospel missions, and ten-cent drama, that he had four children and a wife who no longer lived up to the name of Muriel, and you will readily perceive that Bickins should have known better.

His indiscreet conduct consisted in shoving the window wide open, though he knew that the breeze always did things to the deftly upholstered tresses of Miss Sampkins, his stenographer; in filling his lungs with air as fresh as Halsted-st. may reasonably expect; in permitting an ecstatic smile to aggravate the lines in his face, and letting his thoughts go gipsying when he should have attended to business.

The reason for it all was that it was one of those days in May when Spring, sweet young thing, whispers dizzying snatches of waltz music and confides bits of romance that have to do with lilac scents and swallows and evening hours wrapped in sunsets or silvery moons. Bickins really should have been immune, or contented himself with writing sprag poetry, or purchasing a bit of swamp land for a bungalow out in Maywood, or seeking synonyms for Muriel. He did none of these things; for the coming of spring always gave him a feeling of indecision that was as wistful and vague as first love at fifteen.

"It is imperative that this account be settled at once!" read Miss Sampkins from her stenographic notes in a tone calculated to bring Bickins back to Halsted-st. She moistened the pencil point with her tongue, and looked as if she wanted to testify to something that New Thought had done for her.

The May breeze receded. "Yes—let me see," faltered Bickins. "Imperative this be paid at once. Just finish it off, will you, Miss Sampkins? You know how."

And Bickins resumed his contemplation of the queer ways of spring. Seated on a fruit cart, his dirty legs crossed, a bareheaded boy was munching an apple with an air of huge content. A girl, gracefully swinging lithe young limbs, tripped down the street like an embodiment of youth and spring and hope. It seemed to Bickins that even the saloonkeeper on the corner, his white apron flapping in the breeze, had caught the spirit that was unfolding the earth; for Bickins could not discern his freckles and purple splotches. And wafted on the wind that swept in from the park came a soft-scented reminder that the world was still young for those not afflicted with stiffness of the joints and incipient baldness.

Bickins sighed. He had never been young, you see. Except for that trivial period when he had wept over "Trilby" and quoted De Musset as translated in "The People's Friend," and made puppy love to grammar school belles, and imagined himself in tune with the whisperings of fragrant night and frivolous spring, there hadn't been much romance in his life. It had been all hard work, with just the faintest trace of the bitter-sweet of wanting. And so the years had slipped past with prosaic regularity, and life had grown elbow worn,

and the months and years had swung on creaking hinges.

He became suddenly aware that the clatter of Miss Sampkins' typewriter had ceased.

"If you are through with that, you might as well take a Saturday afternoon off," he invited, and added feelingly, "Fine day, Miss Sampkins."

Miss Sampkins, concurring in this observation, drew the cover over her typewriter, patted out the creases in her skirt, fussed with her hair, murdered her hat with a long pin, and hoped Bickins would have a pleasant Sunday.

AFTER she had gone Bickins stood a long time by the window. Buds were unfolding out there; patches of green blinked in a friendly way between the washings on the lines; there was a feeling, whimsical and tender, in the breeze that caressed the saplings and pirouetted with the smoke that curled from staid old factory chimneys. It was just as if spring did not know that this was Halsted-st.,—dirty, sordid, disreputable old Halsted.

It seemed as if earth was living through all its spring memories again. And somehow it made Bickins quite sad; for he, having never been young, had no leafing age to remember. He sighed, and the sigh was like the stifled groan of one who knows his spring and summer have flown and that the fall is near.

There was something he wished to tell his wife; but he did not know just how to make her understand. It is so easy for a man of forty-five, especially if he is a trifle bald and engaged in a dignified business, to make himself ridiculous even in the eyes of his wife. But having rehearsed his little speech carefully, he stepped to the telephone and called his home.

"That you, Muriel? Just thought it would be nice to take the kids and go to the park tomorrow. We could take a basket lunch along and stay all day. And, Muriel—" Bickins cleared his throat, and felt as we all do when we fear that what we are about to say will sound foolish. "Muriel, let's forget we are getting old," was what he wanted to say; but what he said was, "I'll be home about eight."

For he was quite sure that Muriel would not understand. Their life had not been conducive to great emotions. It had been drab and colorless from the beginning. Even their honeymoon had been serene and unrenowned. It had been a respectable existence, unretrieved by the faintest glimmering of piquancy—except for that one black chapter about which he had never dared a whisper to Muriel and of which she must never, never know.

Over their dinner that evening he shot furtive glances at her, and thought how much more complete and satisfying their life together would have been if she had known—known and shared—the secret with him. But as he looked at her while she sat opposite him, incessantly doling out food and petty admonitions to the children,—themselves but byproducts of dreams ground to dust,—he felt she was too securely gyved to prose and

regularity to possess a love that could triumph over a past like his.

And so, while she slept peacefully beside him that night, he thumped his pillow and told himself again that he had no right to ask her to share that secret, even though by sharing it she would rescue their existence from the grooves of drab commonplace.

THEY trudged toward the park the following day; she toting a lunch basket in the hook of her arm, he leading their youngest by the hand. The sun loved the earth with passion that day, and the wind sang untamed, exultant melodies that to some ears sounded like dreamy, once-upon-a-time ballads, to others as a psalm of hope fringed about days to come; while yet others heard only the call of the anemones that bloomed in the now, and the whisperings of the coy grass that was still young.

The children heard the call of spring to the detriment of immaculate linen and faces soaped to a shine. Bickins, blinking at the sharp sunlight, and Mrs. Bickins, smiling calmly and without ecstasy, followed them over green stretches. That was how they happened to come to the little triangle of green in a remote corner of the park over which old trees splashed wisdom and shadows.

They sat down on the iron bench under the trees, he with fourth-decade deliberateness, she with a little sigh of weariness. For awhile they gazed without words into the lilac-scented mist. Then she said:

"Remember, John, the old wicker seat used to be here? We—they used to move it around with the sun. Wonder where it's gone?"

He laughed unsuccessfully. "But the trees are still here—and they're not much older. Do you suppose they've been keeping count?"

"Keeping count?" she asked, bewildered.

"Yes, of the others that have been here since we—it's about twenty years ago, Muriel."

"Yes, twenty." She leaned back and smiled happily.

"They've been twenty hard years, Muriel. They've kind of taken the starch out of us. We've been getting on a bit—in years. And things didn't come out exactly as we thought they would."

She laid her hand on his arm, disquieted by the note of regret in his words. "No; but we've been happy and comfortable. And it might have been a lot worse."

They sat silent then, watching the children romp about in crisp gingham.

"Yes, I suppose it might have been worse," said he after a long silence, during which their thoughts had strayed far apart.

"It's a fine thing to be young," he added after another pause. He studied her face wistfully. "Sometimes I—don't you kind of wish, once in awhile, Muriel, that we had known what it is to be young?"

There was that in his voice that sounded like a cry from depths seldom gaged. Then he peered into her

Continued on page 14